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ABSTRACT

Early reading instruction is important for all children, but especially for the disadvantaged, because the decision not to expose them to reading at an early age may result in an unrecoverable loss of intellectual potential. Reading readiness as an approach may exile children from literacy permanently because it is an abstract and alien process that risks losing a child's psychological commitment to reading. Naming colors, mastering letter names, matching rhyming words, identifying vowel sounds, matching nonsense syllables, and other readiness activities are not prerequisites for reading. Research shows that children can learn to read without readiness instruction, and in fact, children can fail a readiness test and yet be fully capable of reading. Readiness skills are both harder to teach and harder to acquire than reading itself. Readiness is a harmful exercise, especially for disadvantaged children, and it imparts the message that reading is like readiness--unfathomable in terms of the child's present world and inapplicable in terms of what the child perceives as his or her future needs. Early reading, however, lacks the mystical quality of readiness, and is comprehensible to the child since it begins at the word level and can be immediately used. (SRT)

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Reading Readiness and the Disadvantaged Child

Michael Reed

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READING READINESS AND THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD

The theme of this workshop being 'Early Reading as Cognitive Development', I should emphasize that many early reading practitioners have long viewed the practice of introducing reading to young children as synonymous with fostering cognitive development and expanding intellectual potential. Such a view, however, has demanded a departure from the age-old concept that intelligence is a fixed entity which can to be exploited equally as well at any point in an individual's intellectual progression.

Most teachers of early reading see their work as a necessary counterbalance to a host of factors, particularly common within the disadvantaged child's environment, which work against easy acquisition of reading. Thus, for these teachers, the introduction of early reading is not really a choice between a convenient time to expose children to reading versus an inconvenient one. The real issue is that for many children, especially the disadvantaged, the decision not to expose them to reading at an early age may result in an unrecoverable loss in intellectual potential.

Accompanying this possible loss of cognitive capacity is an attendant threat that the process of exposing disadvantaged children to 'the culture of literacy' in an inappropriate manner, i.e. through reading readiness, may exile them from this 'culture' on a permanent basis. So there are, in my opinion, two imperatives in exposing disadvantaged children to reading: 1) they must be introduced to reading at an early age or run the risk of

losing intellectual potential and 2) the children must be exposed to print through interesting, comprehensible programs like early reading. Exposure through abstract and alien processes like reading readiness run the risk of losing the child's psychological commitment to the reading process.

The central focus of this paper relates to the second of these two imperatives. That is, I would like to explore the notion that reading readiness stands as an invalid and potentially harmful approach for introducing the disadvantaged reader to the world of print. The potentially negative impact of readiness progressions may limit the intellectual progress of disadvantaged youngsters due to the very real possibility that they may come to equate 'readiness' with reading and turn off to the entire process.

The reason is subtle but powerful: Reading readiness constitutes nothing short of a downward extension of all the aspects of the 'culture of literacy' which disadvantaged children find enigmatic, incomprehensible and unrelated to their world. By relying so heavily on readiness to introduce these children to reading, the schools are promoting reading in a manner which has very little relevance form the child's point of view. This has the ultimate effect of <u>psychologically distancing</u> him from reading activities. Instead of attracting the disadvantaged child to reading, readiness begins the distancing process which, judging from the reading success rates of these populations, seems to be perpetuated as the child's schooling progresses.

Those who might be skeptical about this 'psychological distance' need to be alerted to the message embodied in the following quote from the article entitled Children's First Books (Freebody and Baker:1985) taken from the Harvard Journal of Education. The following is the conclusion of the two authors, who linguistically analyzed the difference between the familiar social world of children and the intellectual reading tasks found in the classroom.

> [Children's first books] ... are the early harbingers of the culture of literacy. This is not merely a culture in which people can decode written language; it is also like an informal club or lodge with hidden stylistic signs, well-kept intellectual and social secrets, and obscure objects of reverence. For many children, this is a world in which they will always feel vaguely out of place, insecure, and perhaps inferior. They will see their more fortunate peers detect and soon actually produce the signs; learn, without ever having been explicitly taught, the ways of thinking; and display a genuine reverence for the objects with which they themselves can claim only and uncomfortable acquaintance.

Given that books and literature appear to be an alien culture to children not exposed to these concepts, I contend that readiness activities exhibit even more abstractness because, as I will demonstrate, they have even more "intellectual secrets and obscure objects of reverence." At the same time, readiness scopes have even less in common with the world of the disadvantaged child than reading does. One can comfortably make the claim that the disadvantaged child has at least seen words, books, magazines, etc. , albeit usually from a distance.

What proof can be adduced that readiness and its associated

activities embody the same aspects of 'mystery' and 'psychological distance' found within the more advanced aspects of the culture of literacy? To show this, it is necessary to examine some actual readiness activities in detail to observe their kinship with the culture of literacy.

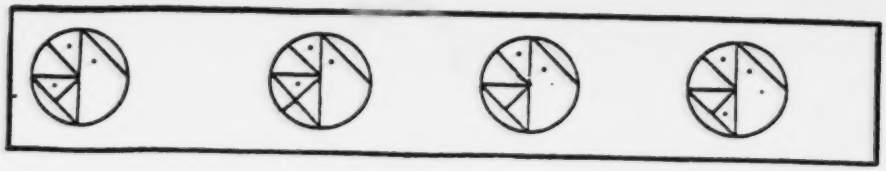
I invite you to examine, several representative readiness tasks taken from the Metropolitan Readiness Test. Example #1 below, asks the child to "mark the picture that shows children mailing letters in a mailbox on the corner".

EXAMPLE 1:

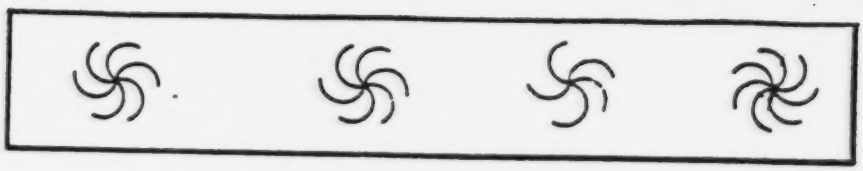
Two of the pictures portray children at a mailbox on the corner. The only dissimilarity is the nearly imperceptible size of the objects being mailed. Here children are being asked to ignore the obvious and pay attention to the almost hidden fact that one set of children has letters and one has packages. This is an example of detail that seems irrelevant to children whose background may have not really even helped them assimilate the <u>obvious</u> (ex. the names of colors). And what child can match this activity with the process of deciphering print?

Examples 2 and 3 depict reading readiness matching activities in which children are asked to pay attention to minute clues in design objects.

EXAMPLE 2:



EXAMPLE 3:



Both exercises possess an air of mysticism in terms of goal, and even for a trained adult the relevance of this activity to reading is strained at best, simply from a logic standpoint.

The requirement that children master letter names before reading is equally as unproductive to the goal of reading. Children who have lacked a concerned adult who constantly helped the child tag objects with names will be even more at a loss with this readiness requirement. Before starting to read, the child is requested to attach a name to 26 symbols given to him from this alien culture. Again the task is both abstruse and overwhelming to a child exposed to the notions for the first time.

In a short space, I have tried to offer some basic evidence as to why readiness has all if not more of the unfathomable traits of reading. The readiness activities selected were chosen as being representative of these traits, but it should be understood that there are countless other examples such as matching rhyming words, identifying vowels sounds, matching nonsense syllables, etc.

Another equally compelling reason for eliminating readiness from the disadvantaged child's curriculum is that these activities are neither related to reading nor prerequisites for it. The research on the relationship between success in reading readiness vs. success in reading gives correlations which average between .20 and .40. Robert Karlin (1957) found only a correlation of .25 between the Metropolitan Reading Test and reading growth at the end of first grade. These findings are not high enough to support a year's worth of activity in readiness.

My doctoral research supports this entire notion of the inapplicability of readiness to the task of reading. My research design called for intentionally instructing children how to read without resort to readiness instruction. After they had mastered the basics of reading they were retroactively tested with readiness instruments. All my early readers failed miserably with these readiness tests. Most of them clearly had not mastered fundamental readiness skills such as letter names, letter- sound correspondences, or how to match rhyming words, etc. Yet, they all could read basic sentences and had sight vocabularies of over 20 words.

When the Readiness Testing Manuals were consulted for suggestions, it was made clear that the results specifically showed that they were by no means ready to read. Most clearly, the producers of these tests and manuals are caught up in a circular logic trap of their own making.

In many instances I spent hours trying to instruct these

readers in readiness skills without result. Many of the readiness skills, I found were tougher to teach and acquire than reading itself. I taught several children who had incalculable problems with naming colors and some simply gave up on learning phonics. Yet the task of reading presented them with no difficulty.

If readiness does not constitute true preparation for reading then what is it? In this author's opinion it is an amalgamation of intellectual skills which "appear" to characterize reading, but which, in reality, only mimic actual reading skills. For certain, the skills contained within readiness scopes represent necessary intellectual concepts to be mastered, but they should never be advertised as preparatory or prerequisite skills for reading.

To conclude, readiness, although long portrayed as the salvation of poor readers, may in fact constitute their biggest problem on their road to literacy. Readiness is nothing more than a downward imposition of all the alien traits of literate society.

As I have tried to show, the practice of making disadvantaged readers plod through these activities before advancing to reading is not innocuous. It is a harmful exercise which imparts the message that reading is like readiness-- unfathomable in terms of the child's present world and inapplicable in terms of what the child perceives as his or her future needs.

Early reading presents us with a viable alternative to the reading readiness trap. It does not share the mystical charac-

teristics cited for readiness. It is comprehensible to the child in his own terms since it begins at the word level and can be immediately employed by him. The activities are transparent, not obscure, since the child can see exactly where his efforts are leading. By commencing reading at the age of 3 or 4, there need not be any pressure on the child to learn at a prescribed rate. The entire process can be imbued with a playful atmosphere in which learning to read becomes an enjoyable activity linked exclusively to the progress rate of the child.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the very existence of readiness programs often stand in the ways of the popularization of early reading. Obviously, a reading program for young children has no chance in a school system which demands that readiness tasks be mastered before reading is undertaken. Early reading can never be initiated under such circumstances and the true losers are generally the disadvantaged children.